

Study Skills: Unpacking essay questions

Video transcript

In this video, we'll discuss how to analyse essay questions.

An essay question usually contains:

1. The Orientation: This is general information about the topic which sets the context.
2. The Topic: This is the subject of your essay.
3. the Focus: This identifies the specific element of the topic, often limiting what you will write about.
4. The Task: This tells you what to do. For example, you could argue for or against something, discuss something, critique something and so on.

Here's an example of how to unpack an essay question.

The first step is to read the question carefully to familiarise yourself with the general subject you will write about.

Next, we find topic words that identify the subject of the essay. In blue, we have the phrases fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, cognitive impairment, role, government, addressing this issue, and communities. So, now we know what the subject of our essay is.

Then, we find task words that tell us what to do. In this case, we have the word evaluate, in green. Evaluate means to assess or judge one or more aspects of something. So, in this essay, we'll evaluate how well the government tackles fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Finally, we identify focus words that limit the scope of your essay. In this essay, we want to focus on the cognitive impairments found in children, not adults. Similarly, we want to focus on the role the national government plays, not local or state governments. Lastly, we want to focus on remote communities, rather than urban communities.

So, to recap. You need to analyse your essay questions by following these four steps: Read the question carefully, identify topic words, identify task words and identify focus words.

And this is how you unpack an essay question. For further help, speak to a Language and Learning Advisor and ask for advice.